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ABSTRACT

Language arts teachers cannot handle the problems of the disadvantaged children of the ghetto because they cannot understand the language of the children well enough to evaluate the abilities of the children or create activities which would improve the quality of language experience for the child. It is possible to provide language arts teachers for ghetto schools with an academic experience which has immediate applications in the classroom. Thorough linguistic knowledge is the primary requisite for a sound language arts teacher-training program. Two courses would give minimum preparation in this area: one dealing with the nature of language and one on urban dialects. Standard English should be taught; the student must be given the language skills which will enable him to alternate between the dialect of his peers, his home, his teachers, and his books. The language arts teacher in the ghetto school should (1) be familiar with ghetto culture; (2) study black English, but not necessarily as a means of communication with his students or the community; (3) learn about the family and community structures; (4) study the effects of poverty; and (5) study the peer group relations and different learning styles of ghetto children. A successful ghetto teacher must be resourceful, have magnetism, possess self-knowledge, and reflect love. (AMM)

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THE PREPARATION OF LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHERS FOR GHETTO SCHOOLS

In the 1960's, the struggle of black Americans to achieve racial justice brought on a challenge to certain traditional definitions and institutions. Our massive, creaking institutions lack both the speed and maneuverability to respond with anything but ponderous and authoritarian power. Influential academic disciplines also have been called to account as to their impartiality and their relevance. Our own disciplines of linguistics and language teaching fall under the shadow of distorted knowledge caused by the biases through which we view the knowledge and by the misguided assumptions about what is ``good for'' the people we study and attempt to teach.

Young people--black and white--have discovered that knowledge can be used against the discovery of truth as well as toward the discovery of truth; they have seen increasing evidence that the application of knowledge can be used against as well as for people; they have seen that the college professor-researcher can work in his government supported, air-conditioned laboratory making pronouncements about American education without ever soiling his feet in the gutters of the urban ghetto, or for that matter, on the curb of average schools.

There is one very hopeful sign brought about by the social concerns of the young in the flurry of activity in educational institutions across the country: a new interest in service to people, especially disadvantaged people. Frequently outside the more traditional institutions, but creating a major impact, numbers of programs developed at the local level for direct people-to-people aid are attempting to improve the quality of life in our cities. The programs may be at the very personal level such as ``Hot Line'' where a disturbed individual may

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talk by phone to another individual who cares. They may affect the whole community as do the street academies forming in several of our cities. Numbers of these programs will doubtless bring about change in our cumbersome, dehumanized institutions. We hope that social conscience will dictate changes which directly attack the problems of poverty and ignorance.

It is presumptious to talk of the social disease of ignorance on such a grand scale when there are such vast areas of ignorance in our own teacher-training profession. Sadly, it is true that language arts teachers cannot handle the problems of minority children, the disadvantaged children of the ghetto. They cannot understand the language of the children well enough to evaluate the abilities of the children or create activities which would improve the quality of language experience for the child. Certainly it is not the fault or ignorance of the teacher alone. A review of the typical preparation for language arts teachers makes one wonder that they do as well as they do with as many children as they do.

It is possible to provide language arts teachers for ghetto schools with an academic experience which has immediate applications in the classrooms. Four areas of experience which are important are linguistic knowledge, teaching methods, cultural orientation, and personality and attitude.

Linguistic knowledge. Linguistic knowledge may be used for whatever purpose an individual or a profession may desire. We have seen some evidence in our profession of so-called linguistic studies to show that black children, for example, have poor cognitive abilities, limited expressive abilities, impoverished verbal systems, and so on, hardly an honorable use of a scientific discipline. Although the validity of some of these studies has been questioned by serious scholars, the immorality of the intent frequently lingers on in the classroom where the teacher, through the same ignorance which produced the studies in the first place, makes evaluation of the students on irrelevant or inadequate linguistic data.

Thorough linguistic knowledge is the primary requisite for a sound language arts teacher-training program. Language--its reality as an organized system and its use by children in the classroom--is the legitimate concern of the language arts teacher.

Two courses would give minimum preparation in this area. First would be a course dealing with the nature of language, an introduction to the basic concepts of linguistics and including both the description of a language system and an analysis of language acquisition. The course should serve as an introduction to further linguistic study, but more importantly should focus on those aspects of language investigation which have relevance to the classroom teacher. It should not be beneath the instructor to investigate with the class, the translation of these concepts into the terminology and level appropriate to the children they will ultimately be teaching. In fact, an investigation of the incidence and reliability of linguistic knowledge in the elementary language arts texts should be a profitable experience.

The second course would be one perhaps called urban dialects, a more detailed analysis of selected urban dialects we normally call substandard,including for some regions black English, Puerto Rican English, Appalachian English, and so on. The focus of the course would be on the description, not evaluation, of the variety of English under investigation. An objective analysis of the degree to which the dialect stigmatizes the speaker would also be appropriate. Throughout the course and the methods course to follow, the teacher-trainers should have frequent and sustained contact with the speakers of the dialects under investigation.

Teaching methods. Good intentions in teaching standard English to non-standard speakers do not cure the social disease of discrimination. Even the most effective methods resulting in mastery of standard English or the Queen's English will not result in the eradication of prejudice. Teaching white English to black children will not solve the problem.

Standard English should be taught. A brief summary of what appear realistic reasons for teaching standard English would include the following: Ultimately, it enables the speaker to enter into the mainstream of American life. Immediately, it enhances his ability to read standard, that is educated, English. Educated and uneducated speakers reflect negative feelings toward non-standard speech. Most importantly, learning a second dialect teaches the child more about the language process. Contrary to one argument against learning a standard dialect because it devalues the native dialect, one may learn a second dialect, as he may learn a second language, without losing the first. In the learning process, he acquires linguistic knowledge and extends his language competence in ways unavailable to the monodialect speaker.

What particular pedagogical approach then would be acceptable if one is both to preserve the first dialect and yet teach standard English? In our department, Urban and Overseas English Programs, at Indiana University, we call our methods course Methods and Materials in Teaching Standard English as an Alternate Dialect. The title perhaps implies some things we do not do. We do not suggest substituting a second dialect (standard) for the first (non-standard). We do not suggest that there is only one appropriate classroom dialect (standard only) and another home or playground dialect (non-standard). Our emphasis is on dialect extension--the use of one's language to extend himself into any communication situation the child aspires to. This means you have to start with the language equipment the child has, and this is far more varied at the first grade than any of the dialect studies would suggest in their broad generalizations. From this the child must be stimulated in his aspirations. He must want to read; he must want to communicate with the teacher, or the banker, or an employer in their language. But most of all, he must be given the language skills which will enable him to alternate between the dialect of his peers, his home, his teachers, and his books.

How important then are teaching methods? If one can develop the appropriate attitudes toward language variation and some skills in using the specific techniques of dialect extension, one methods course should be adequate.

Cultural orientation. Some few black educators, asked whether a white middle class teacher can be effective in the ghetto, have said it is doubtful. A change of question was in order. Some black street workers from New York City were asked what experiences would prepare a white middle class teacher-trainer for work in ghetto school. Their answer was sixty days in the ghetto. Along with his linguistic competencies then, the language arts teacher in the ghetto school must be familiar with ghetto culture. Although certain descriptive literature is helpful, the following first-hand experiences are necessary for the teacher's cultural understanding. Let's take the teacher in the black inner-city school as an example.

First, he should learn black English, but not necessarily as a means of communication with his students or the community. He would in most instances appear quite foolish in his attempts to reproduce it. Studying black English has great significance, however, for understanding the problems of the students. His efforts in learning will give him greater respect for the children's dialect and sensitivity for what he is asking them to do in learning standard English.

Second, he should learn about the family and community structures, not only the obvious sociological observations of differences between the cultures--such as no man as head of a household--but what the existing family unit really is like and who the persons are of authority and high position in the community and what positions people do hold in the community.

Third, he should study the effects of poverty--not just the fact that Timmy doesn't have breakfast and Wilma is dirty all the time, but community poverty as it affects the expectations, aspirations, and performance of the individuals in the community.

Fourth, he must study the peer group relations and the different learning styles of ghetto children. This is most crucial in understanding and capitalizing on the high priority placed on oral language by children in the street.

How important is cultural orientation? Sixty days worth? With the right attitudes and skills perhaps less. With the wrong attitudes and expectations, no amount of time would be effective. The cultural orientation should be built into the program as a component in the observation of students and analysis of their language during the dialects and methods courses.

Personality. The final question is what kind of a person can do all this? Given the training outlined so far, it is obvious that there are still qualities of personality which would suit some people to this task and disqualify others. Four qualities have been identified which the successful ghetto teacher must have. He must be resourceful. He must have magnetism. He must possess self-knowledge. And he must reflect love.

1. The urban child is resourceful, in many ways much more sophisticated than his suburban counterpart. He may not have ranged far from his home on the block where he lives, but he has seen more of the human misery that may make up life in the ghetto than his teacher has in all probability. The effective language arts teacher must be resourceful. Not only must he know everything about anything in the curriculum, he must have ready answers or resources for almost any problem. The teacher must be resourceful in at least two areas of operation: in the community and in the classroom.

Knowledge of community resources are important for the teacher interested in improving the child's life outside the school. In most cities there are several agencies available to support the child, but without the direct intervention of someone with deep concern for the child this help never reaches its objective. Just a few examples will illustrate. If Bill misses school because his mother is sick and he's caring for her, can the teacher find a visiting nurse

and a sitter? If Alma misses class every other day because she shares one pair of shoes with her sister, can the teacher contact the right church group to aid the family? If Sue is worried sick about her older brother because he is on dope, can the teacher get in touch with a street worker who has the right approach and connections to help the boy? No amount of skillful language teaching will overcome the psychological and social interferences stemming from the complexities of an impoverished urban life. Direct attention--not full-time attention, but immediate and direct help--toward the alleviation of the problems will make the teacher's work more effective.

Resourcefulness in the classroom also takes special talent. Language training can take place in many unlooked for situations. The dialect of the streets, the emotion and passion of incidents in the ghetto, the fragile sensibilities of young children growing up in a hostile environment provide many opportunities for the alert language arts teacher to make language instruction mean something more than a lesson in the white man's book.

2. The leader--whether he is a streetgang leader, a political figure, or a social spokesman--has special qualities which set him apart from the mass. He has what we call charisma. Its presence in an individual makes you pay attention simply because of his magnetism, not because of the logic or reasonableness of his arguments. It is a quality the Kennedys had, Johnson and Nixon don't. Paul Newman has it, James Daley doesn't. Englebert Humperdink apparently doesn't have it, Tom Jones does. James Meredith doesn't have it, Julian Bond does.

Along with a number of important learned skills, the successful leader also learns to capitalize on an often natural tendency to stand out in a group. He has the world by the tail. When he moves, people move with him. When he twists the tail, it hurts. There is a certain strength and energy, a color, a self-confidence in his manner and bearing and a flaunting of his power, a sense of the dramatic, a sexuality and sense of being alive, and most significantly a feeling for language and rhetoric.

Success as a leader on the streets develops early. The kid who is leader on his block can probably outfight the others, but it is a cinch he can out talk them. His survival depends on his ability to talk his way into positions of strength, and talk his way out of threats to his fragile authority.

It would appear that this dynamic quality of personality would be out of our scope in teacher training. Those who have it become community leaders or show business stars. Those who become language arts teachers probably do not have it. Granted that it cannot be reproduced at will, nevertheless, recognition of what it is that children especially admire and respect in adults may help a teacher make some moves in this direction. The aspect that is the most appropriately analyzed is the language and rhetoric of the successful leaders. And it is probably closer to the language of the streets than the language of the textbook.

3. The third quality of personality deemed important in the language arts teacher working in the ghetto school is self-knowledge. The classroom teacher who would prefer to be somewhere other than the classroom is horribly obvious to the student, but many teachers themselves do not realize--consciously at any rate--that they are acting out a role in which they are miscast. Very few teacher-training programs provide the opportunity for the participants to stop and think about their progress toward some often rather fuzzy objective. Many programs lock the student in; they provide no escape when he reaches a point of decision.

Training programs can help the student discover his own potential as a teacher. Complete self-understanding on the part of the student certainly is not provided by a teacher-training program, but early, face-to-face involvement with alternate dialects and the children who speak them should help the student understand his relationship to such language arts programs more clearly. If he decides it is not for him, so much the better. He can get out before further harm is done to the children and himself. There should be more flexibility in entering and leaving such a training program, with adequate first-hand experiences to enable the participant to evaluate his role in teaching.

4. The fourth quality of personality is love. There is no curriculum for language arts teachers which trains a teacher to be loving--or lovable, for that matter. The assumption is that loving--that is showing warmth, empathy, concern--is a natural emotion easily transferred to any or all individuals in the classroom. There are shocking figures to the contrary, though, with instances of unloving behavior ranging from classroom beatings to out-and-out psychological warfare between students and teachers. Our elementary classrooms are filled with mother-love images, but there is no real assurance in the typical classroom structure that the child will receive the sympathy and non-possessive love implied by the presence of these mother figures.

Although methods of measuring such behavior are rather imprecise, there is casual observation and some experimental evidence to suggest that students achieve more with teachers with high empathy, warmth, and genuineness. These characteristics appear to be more important than the students' IQ according to studies made in reading classes.

The culturally deprived child must be supported in his learning efforts by more than the average, impersonal teacher-student relationship--not because he is unloved at home, although that may be the case in some instances, but because the school has taken a position which indicates to the child that nearly everything he does is wrong. At the extreme, his personal cleanliness is bad, his attention is poor, his language is all wrong, he does not do his homework, he has no respect for property, he spends his lunch money for candy, or cigaretts, or dope, and he is disrespectful. It is difficult for the child to interpret any of this as genuine understanding or empathy. Teachers, and parents as well, want their children to say and do the right things, the things for which they will be liked. But since reprimand and punishment are the usual rewards for undesirable behavior and little or nothing is done for right behavior, the child has no direction or guidance for developing his own warmth and sympathy for others.

The effects of concern and love in working with delinquents, underachievers, mental patients, disturbed children, and normal children in the classroom have been the most significant factor in students' perseverance and success as attested to by both experimental psychologists, teachers, and street workers in our troubled urban areas.

The ferment of the 1960's activated us to finally ask, ``What do those **black people want?**'' They've been telling us for a long time, but new optimism brought about by the beginning of the 1970's gives hope that the American educational system will grow to reflect our stated democratic ideals of equal opportunity for all children.

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